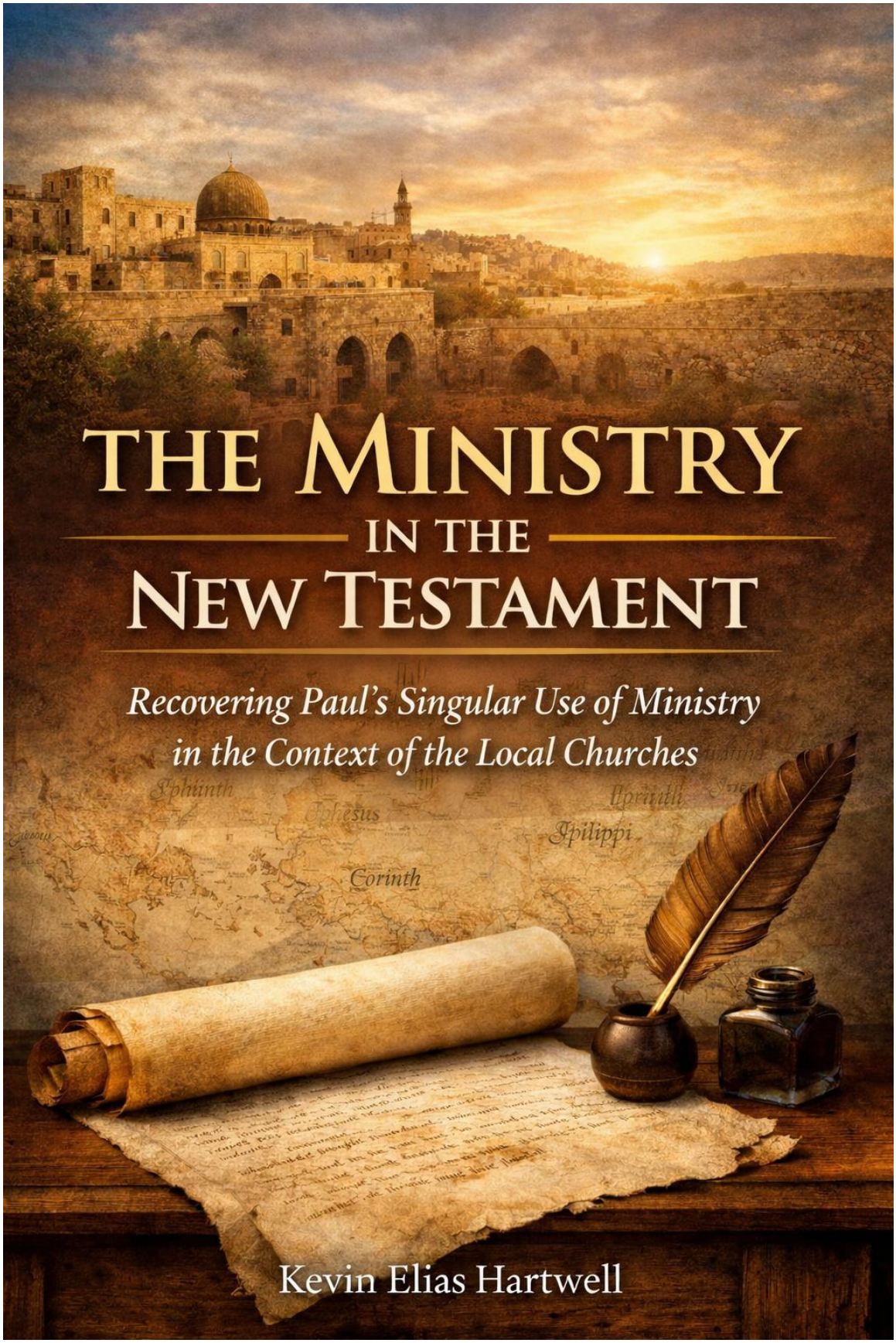
THE MINISTRY
IN THE
NEW TESTAMENT
Recovering Paul's Singular Use of Ministry
in the Context of the Local Churches
Ephesus
Philippi
Corinth
Kevin Elias Hartwell

# The Ministry in the New Testament

## Recovering Paul's Singular Use of Ministry in the Context of the Local Churches

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### Introduction

Few words in modern Christianity are used more frequently — and understood more poorly — than the word ministry. In contemporary Christian language, ministry is commonly pluralized, categorized, branded, and organized into countless forms: youth ministry, outreach ministry, worship ministry, counseling ministry, and many others. This usage is so normalized that few pause to ask whether it bears any real relationship to the way the New Testament itself uses the word.

A careful reading of the New Testament, particularly the writings of the apostle Paul, reveals a striking contrast. Paul does not speak of ministries in the plural as parallel religious enterprises. Rather, he consistently speaks of the ministry — singular, definite, and received from God. He thanks God not for being given a ministry, but for being put into the ministry (1 Timothy 1:12), indicating a divine reality that existed prior to and independent of his personal service.

This writing seeks to recover the New Testament meaning of ministry by examining its usage in Scripture, its connection to the New Covenant, and its inseparable relationship to the apostolic local churches — one church in one city. It does not propose a new movement, a new group, or a corrective organization. Nor does it argue for a denominational expression called "the local church." Rather, it seeks to remove confusion by returning to the biblical vocabulary itself, allowing Scripture to define its own terms.

To clarify the New Testament meaning of ministry is not to condemn believers, but to distinguish spiritual reality from religious convention. Only by doing so can the reader understand how far modern usage has drifted — and why the apostolic vision remains both simple and profound.

### A Word to the Born-Again Reader

Before considering the New Testament meaning of ministry, one foundational matter must be made clear for every born-again believer. According to the New Testament, every regenerated Christian is already a member of the church in the city where he or she lives. This membership is not conferred by registration, affiliation, approval, or qualification. It is the direct and automatic result of the new birth in Christ.

The church is not joined; it is entered by life. When a person is born of God, he is born into Christ, and being in Christ, he is organically joined to His Body. Since the Body of Christ is universally one yet practically expressed in localities, the believer's place in the church is determined not by choice or preference, but by where he dwells.

No additional prerequisites are required. No endorsement, doctrinal alignment, cultural fit, or institutional acceptance is needed. The only practical matter remaining is simply this: to begin meeting with other believers *as the church in one's locality*. This was the unquestioned assumption of the apostles and the normal practice of the early believers.

Such a statement may sound unfamiliar — or even strange — in a modern religious landscape filled with many churches in one city, each distinguished by name, doctrine, or tradition. Yet the measure of truth is not familiarity but revelation. The Holy Scriptures consistently present one church in one city as the practical expression of the one Body of Christ. This is not an ideal, a movement, or a slogan; it is the plain testimony of the Word of God.

God's Word is truth. It does not adjust itself to religious custom, nor does it fade with time. What it reveals endures forever. To see this is not to criticize others, but to align oneself quietly and faithfully with what the Scriptures themselves declare.

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## 1. Why the Word Ministry Must Be Re-Examined

Words shape thought, and thought governs practice. When a word central to the New Testament is redefined, diluted, or repurposed, the result is not merely semantic confusion but spiritual displacement. This is precisely the case with the word ministry.

In contemporary Christianity, ministry has become one of the most elastic and least examined terms in common use. It is applied to programs, departments, career paths, outreach efforts, demographic initiatives, and organizational roles. Churches are said to "have ministries," leaders are said to "run ministries," and believers are encouraged to "find a ministry" that fits their interests or abilities. This language is so pervasive that it is rarely questioned.

Yet the very familiarity of this usage conceals a serious problem: it does not arise from the New Testament itself.

A re-examination of the word ministry is necessary not because believers are insincere, nor because service to others is wrong, but because the modern usage of the term often bears little resemblance to the way Scripture employs it. When the same word is used to describe fundamentally different realities, misunderstanding becomes inevitable. Readers assume continuity where, in fact, there has been a significant shift.

In the New Testament, ministry is not a category of church activity but a divine reality rooted in the New Covenant. It is not something initiated by human planning, expanded by organizational growth, or sustained by institutional structure. Rather, it is something received, entrusted, and shared among those whom God has placed within it. This is why

Paul can speak of the ministry as something objective, definite, and singular — something into which one is put by God Himself.

Modern Christian usage, by contrast, treats ministry as something that can be multiplied indefinitely. The plural form — ministries — has become normal, even assumed. Each perceived need gives rise to a new ministry; each demographic becomes the focus of another specialized effort. Over time, the church is no longer understood as a living Body that ministers Christ, but as an organization that manages ministries.

This shift has consequences. When ministry is understood primarily as activity, it becomes detached from life. When it is understood as structure, it becomes detached from the Body. When it is understood as a role or position, it becomes detached from the inner man. None of these detachments are harmless. They subtly redirect attention away from Christ Himself as the content of ministry and away from the church as His corporate expression.

The New Testament does not oppose service, care, or practical help. On the contrary, these are assumed outcomes of a living church life. What it does not support is the fragmentation of ministry into parallel enterprises, each operating alongside the church rather than issuing from it. The problem, therefore, is not that believers serve, but that the biblical meaning of ministry has been replaced with a functional substitute.

To re-examine the word ministry is not to introduce novelty but to recover clarity. It is to allow Scripture to define its own terms rather than forcing biblical language to carry modern assumptions. Only by returning to the New Testament usage can the reader understand why Paul speaks the way he does, why he uses the singular form so consistently, and why ministry in his writings is inseparable from Christ, the Spirit, and the building up of the church.

For this reason, the word ministry must be examined afresh — not emotionally, not polemically, but scripturally. The chapters that follow do not seek to correct practices directly, but to restore meaning. Once the meaning is clear, practice will either align naturally or reveal its divergence.

## 2. The New Testament Meaning of Ministry (διακονία)

Any serious examination of ministry must begin not with modern practice but with the New Testament word itself. The primary Greek term translated ministry is διακονία (diakonia), along with its related forms διάκονος (minister, servant) and διακονέω (to serve, to minister). While the word carries the general sense of service, its New Testament usage goes far beyond the idea of helpful activity or religious labor.

In the New Testament, diakonia does not denote an organizational unit, a specialized department, or a role defined by function alone. Rather, it denotes a service that conveys something, a service that dispenses a reality from one to another. In Paul's writings especially, that reality is not information, assistance, or moral instruction, but Christ Himself ministered by the Spirit.

This is why Paul can speak of the ministry in objective and absolute terms. He does not describe ministry as something he performs intermittently or manages administratively. He describes it as a divine operation in which he has been included. Ministry, for Paul, is not what he does for God; it is what God does through him for the sake of others.

The clearest expression of this appears in Paul's description of the New Covenant: "Who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant — not of letter but of Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). Here, ministry is explicitly defined by its source, its means, and its effect. The source is God, who makes His servants sufficient. The means is the Spirit, not written regulation. The effect is life, not mere instruction. Ministry, therefore, is inseparable from the life-giving work of the Spirit.

This understanding immediately separates New Testament ministry from modern religious usage. In contemporary Christianity, ministry is often evaluated by visibility, efficiency, or impact. In the New Testament, ministry is evaluated by whether life is ministered. Where the Spirit gives life, ministry is present. Where life is absent, activity alone does not constitute ministry, regardless of sincerity or effort.

Paul deepens this definition by describing ministry as a stewardship: "A stewardship has been entrusted to me" (1 Corinthians 9:17). A stewardship is not owned by the steward; it is entrusted to him. The steward does not determine its content or redefine its purpose. He is responsible only to dispense faithfully what he has received. Thus, ministry is not creative invention but faithful administration of what God has already given.

This explains why Paul can use multiple descriptive phrases — the ministry of the Spirit, the ministry of righteousness, the ministry of reconciliation — without introducing multiple ministries. These are not different ministries but different aspects of the same ministry, viewed from different angles. In every case, the substance is identical: Christ dispensed to people through the Spirit.

The ministry of reconciliation, for example, is not a program designed to repair relationships. It is the proclamation and impartation of Christ Himself, through whom God reconciles people to Himself and, consequently, to one another. The ministry of righteousness is not moral improvement, but the impartation of Christ as righteousness to those who believe. The ministry of the Spirit is not emotional experience, but the inward operation of divine life.

All of this reveals that diakonia in the New Testament is fundamentally organic, not organizational. It belongs to the realm of life, not structure. It flows through persons, not through systems. It is carried out in weakness, not in professional strength. This is why Paul can say, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). The treasure is Christ. The vessels are believers. The ministry is the dispensing of the treasure through fragile vessels by divine power.

Equally important is the context in which diakonia operates. In the New Testament, ministry is always exercised in relation to the church, and more specifically, to the local churches. Paul does not minister in abstraction. His ministry is always toward the saints, for their building up, within the concrete reality of local church life. There is no New Testament example of ministry functioning independently of the church or alongside it as a parallel enterprise.

This is why ministry in the New Testament cannot be detached from the Body of Christ. Ministry exists for the Body, within the Body, and through the members of the Body. When ministry is removed from this context, it loses its New Testament character and becomes something else, even if it retains biblical language.

To understand diakonia properly, then, is to recognize that ministry is not primarily about service rendered outwardly, but about Christ supplied inwardly. Service follows life; it does not replace it. The New Testament never confuses the fruit with the source. Modern Christianity often does.

The recovery of the New Testament meaning of ministry begins here: not with correcting behavior, reorganizing churches, or redefining roles, but with seeing that ministry is the living transmission of Christ Himself. Only when this meaning is restored can the word ministry be used truthfully and without confusion.

### 3. "Putting Me into the Ministry" — Paul's Singular Use

When Paul speaks of ministry, he does so with a precision that leaves little room for modern reinterpretation. One of his most revealing statements occurs in his personal testimony to Timothy:

"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has empowered me, that He considered me faithful, putting me into the ministry." (1 Timothy 1:12)

This sentence is decisive for understanding Paul's concept of ministry. He does not say that God gave him a ministry, assigned him a ministry, or called him to start a ministry. He says that God put him into the ministry. The ministry, therefore, is presented as an already-existing divine reality into which Paul was placed.

The language is unmistakably singular. Paul speaks of the ministry, not a ministry. This is not a stylistic accident. Throughout his writings, Paul consistently refers to ministry as a definite, shared reality rather than as a collection of individual enterprises. His grammar reflects his theology: there is one ministry, just as there is one gospel, one Spirit, one Body, and one Lord.

This single statement in 1 Timothy 1:12 also clarifies the source of ministry. Paul thanks Christ Jesus our Lord for empowering him and for placing him into the ministry. Ministry does not originate with human desire, gifting, ambition, or opportunity. It originates with Christ Himself. Empowerment precedes placement, and placement precedes service. Paul's faithfulness did not create the ministry; it qualified him to participate in what God had

already established.

Equally important is the context in which Paul makes this statement. He is not boasting in achievement or recounting success. He is recalling mercy. Just prior to this verse, Paul speaks of his former condition as a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man. The ministry, in his view, is not a reward for competence but an expression of divine grace. To be placed into the ministry is to be entrusted with something far greater than oneself.

This understanding stands in sharp contrast to modern Christian assumptions. Today, ministry is often viewed as something one identifies, discovers, develops, or launches. Individuals are encouraged to discern "their ministry" based on personal inclination, skill, or burden. Paul's language allows for none of this. Ministry is not personalized in that way. It is corporate in nature, singular in essence, and universal in scope, even though it is carried out through many different persons.

Paul's consistent use of the singular also protects the ministry from fragmentation. Because the ministry is one, no individual can claim ownership of it, redefine it, or isolate it as his own sphere. Paul speaks boldly of his labor, his commission, and his stewardship, but never of "his ministry" as a separate entity. Even when distinguishing his apostleship from that of others, he does so within the framework of the one ministry entrusted to the apostles for the sake of the churches.

This becomes even clearer when Paul speaks of "this ministry": "Therefore, having this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart" (2 Corinthians 4:1). Again, the ministry is something received, not initiated. It is something shared, not competed for. Paul does not describe a portfolio of ministries but a single ministry with many demands, many sufferings, and many expressions. What varies is not the ministry itself, but the circumstances in which it is carried out and the measure of grace given to each servant.

Paul's singular usage also guards against professionalism. Because ministry is something one is placed into by God, it cannot be treated as a career path or vocational category. It is not entered by education, credentialing, or institutional recognition. It is entered by divine calling and sustained by divine mercy. This is why Paul repeatedly emphasizes weakness, suffering, and dependency rather than strength, success, or recognition.

Finally, Paul's concept of being put into the ministry must be understood in its ecclesial context. He was placed into the ministry for the sake of the churches. His apostleship was not an independent mission but a service to the Body of Christ as expressed in local churches. Ministry, for Paul, always moves toward building, establishing, and supplying the churches. Detached from this goal, ministry loses its apostolic meaning.

To read Paul carefully, then, is to encounter a view of ministry that is unified, Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered, and church-oriented. The singular phrase "putting me into the ministry" gathers all of these elements into one expression. It leaves no room for a fragmented, individualized, or institutionalized understanding of ministry. What Paul

describes is not a religious role, but a participation in God's own work of dispensing Christ for the building up of His Body.

### 4. The Ministry of the New Covenant — Christ, Spirit, and Life

When Paul speaks of the ministry, he most fully unfolds its nature in his discussion of the New Covenant. Nowhere is his understanding of ministry more explicit, more theological, or more searching than in 2 Corinthians chapters 3 and 4. Here, ministry is not defined by activity, responsibility, or effectiveness, but by what is ministered, by what means, and with what inward result.

Paul writes, "Who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant — not of letter but of Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). This verse is foundational. It establishes that ministry belongs not to the realm of religious instruction but to the realm of life-giving reality. The contrast Paul draws is not between good and bad teaching, but between letter and Spirit, between outward regulation and inward life. Ministry, therefore, is not the communication of religious knowledge, even biblical knowledge, but the operation of the Spirit who gives life.

In Paul's thought, the New Covenant is not merely a new arrangement of forgiveness or a new system of belief. It is the covenant in which Christ Himself is imparted into the believers as life. To minister under the New Covenant is to participate in this divine impartation. Thus, ministry is inseparable from Christ as life, the Spirit as the means, and the inner man as the sphere of operation.

Paul continues by describing this ministry as the ministry of the Spirit: "If the ministry of death… came with glory… how shall the ministry of the Spirit not be more in glory?" (2 Corinthians 3:7–8). The Spirit here is not an abstract power or emotional influence. He is the processed and indwelling Spirit of Christ, operating within the believers to transform them inwardly. Ministry, therefore, is not measured by outward change alone, but by the inward work of transformation.

This is why Paul later says, "But we all… are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Transformation is the hallmark of New Covenant ministry. It is slow, inward, organic, and progressive. It does not result from pressure, exhortation, or discipline imposed from without, but from the Spirit's operation from within.

Paul also calls this ministry the ministry of righteousness: "For if the ministry of condemnation is glory, much more the ministry of righteousness abounds with glory" (2 Corinthians 3:9). Righteousness here is not moral rectitude achieved by effort, but Christ Himself as righteousness imparted to the believer. To minister righteousness is not to urge people to behave righteously, but to minister Christ as their standing before God and their living reality.

In chapter 4, Paul gathers all of these threads together: "Therefore, having this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart" (2 Corinthians 4:1). The ministry Paul speaks

of is one, yet it encompasses Spirit, righteousness, transformation, and life. It is received as mercy, not achieved by effort. This explains why Paul can endure suffering, weakness, and opposition without discouragement.

Paul then makes one of his most revealing statements concerning the content of ministry: "For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord" (2 Corinthians 4:5). This sentence decisively excludes modern notions of ministry centered on personality, gifting, or visibility. The content of New Covenant ministry is not the minister, not his experience, not his success, and not his message about himself. The content is Christ Jesus as Lord, ministered into others through the Spirit.

Paul immediately follows this with the declaration, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). The treasure is Christ as life. The vessels are fragile, weak, and unimpressive. Ministry, therefore, is intentionally designed by God to exclude human boasting. Weakness is not a hindrance to ministry; it is the environment in which divine life is most clearly expressed.

Crucially, this New Covenant ministry always operates for the sake of the church. Paul does not minister life in isolation. He ministers Christ so that the believers may be built together as the Body of Christ. Life produces transformation; transformation produces building. Ministry that does not result in the building up of the Body is incomplete, regardless of its sincerity or apparent success.

Thus, the ministry of the New Covenant is not one ministry among many. It is the ministry, defined by Christ as its content, the Spirit as its means, life as its result, and the church as its goal. Any use of the word ministry that does not touch these realities may retain the language of Scripture, but it no longer retains its meaning.

To see ministry in this way is not to elevate a theory, but to recover a reality. Paul's ministry was not extraordinary because of who Paul was, but because of what was ministered through him. That same ministry remains today wherever Christ is ministered as life by the Spirit for the building up of the church.

### 5. Ministry and Stewardship — Not Function, Not Career

In Paul's writings, ministry is inseparably linked with the concept of stewardship. This connection is essential, because it protects the ministry from being misunderstood as a function, a role, or a profession. Where stewardship is lost, ministry is inevitably redefined along human lines.

Paul states this plainly: "For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if unwillingly, a stewardship has been entrusted to me" (1 Corinthians 9:17). A stewardship is something entrusted, not chosen, created, or owned. The steward does not determine the content of what he administers; he is responsible only to dispense faithfully what has been placed in his care. This immediately separates New Testament ministry from modern notions of self-defined calling or vocational ministry.

In contemporary Christianity, ministry is often understood as a function one performs. Individuals are encouraged to identify their function, develop their skill set, and find a place where that function can be exercised. Over time, this functional view easily hardens into a professional one. Ministry becomes a track, a position, or a career path, supported by training, credentials, and institutional recognition.

Paul's language allows for none of this.

For Paul, ministry is not something he does for God; it is something God has entrusted to him for others. This is why he consistently speaks of the stewardship of the grace of God: "If indeed you have heard of the stewardship of the grace of God which was given to me for you" (Ephesians 3:2). Grace here is not abstract favor, nor merely forgiveness. Grace is Christ Himself given to be dispensed. The stewardship, therefore, is the responsibility to minister Christ to others for their growth and building up. This stewardship defines Paul's ministry far more than any outward activity.

Because ministry is a stewardship, it is never self-directed. Paul does not speak of exploring ministry options or aligning ministry with personal aptitude. He speaks of obligation, faithfulness, and accountability. A steward is measured not by creativity or success, but by faithfulness: "Here, moreover, it is sought in stewards that one be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2).

This single criterion stands in sharp contrast to modern measurements of ministry, which often emphasize visibility, expansion, and influence. Faithfulness, by contrast, is largely hidden. It is exercised before God, not before an audience. It concerns whether Christ is being ministered, not whether results are impressive.

Stewardship also excludes ownership. Paul never speaks of his ministry as a personal domain. Even when defending his apostleship, he does so as one entrusted with something that belongs to God. Ministry is never a possession to be protected, promoted, or passed on as a legacy. It is a trust that will one day be accounted for before the Lord.

This understanding also explains why Paul rejects any notion of ministry as a career. Careers are chosen, developed, advanced, and eventually retired from. Stewardship is none of these. One does not advance in stewardship; one either remains faithful or proves unfaithful. There is no ladder to climb, no position to secure, and no retirement from responsibility. As long as one lives before God, the stewardship remains.

Moreover, stewardship is always exercised within the Body, not independently. Paul's stewardship was given for you, for the churches, for the saints. Ministry detached from the Body becomes self-referential. Stewardship, by definition, exists for the benefit of others. This again distinguishes New Testament ministry from modern individualized expressions.

Importantly, stewardship does not imply uniformity of function. Paul fully recognizes diversity of gifts, measures of grace, and kinds of service. What he does not allow is the fragmentation of ministry into separate enterprises. Diverse functions operate within the

one stewardship of the one ministry, not alongside it as independent callings.

When ministry is reduced to function, Christ is easily replaced by technique. When it is reduced to career, Christ is replaced by ambition. Stewardship preserves ministry in its proper place: under divine ownership, exercised in dependence, measured by faithfulness, and directed toward the building up of the church.

To recover the New Testament meaning of ministry, therefore, requires the recovery of stewardship. Without this governing concept, ministry inevitably drifts toward professionalism, specialization, and self-definition. With it, ministry remains what Paul understood it to be: a sacred trust to dispense Christ for God's purpose, carried out quietly, faithfully, and under the Lord's authority.

## 6. Ministry in the Context of the Local Churches

In the New Testament, ministry is never presented as an abstract spiritual activity detached from concrete ecclesial reality. Nor is it portrayed as an independent work running alongside the church. Ministry, as Paul understands it, is always exercised in the context of the local churches and for their building up. Detached from this context, ministry loses its New Testament character and becomes something else, even if it retains biblical terminology.

Paul's ministry was universal in scope but local in expression. He was commissioned by God to announce Christ among the nations, yet his labor consistently resulted in the establishment and strengthening of churches in specific localities. He did not merely win converts or gather followers; he labored to see believers built together as the church in the places where they lived. This pattern is unmistakable throughout Acts and the Epistles.

Paul writes to the church of God which is in Corinth, to the saints who are in Ephesus, to the church in Thessalonica, and to the churches of Galatia. Ministry always moves toward the church, and the church is always identified by locality, not by name, doctrine, or affiliation. This reveals that the local church is not an optional setting for ministry but its ordained sphere.

This context is crucial for understanding what ministry is and what it is not. In the New Testament, there is no concept of ministry operating independently of the church, nor of ministries existing as parallel structures alongside it. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherd-teachers do not form separate organizations; they function within the church and for the church. Their labor supplies the saints so that the church may grow and be built up in life.

Paul makes this explicit in Ephesians: "For the perfecting of the saints unto the work of ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). Here, ministry is not concentrated in a few gifted individuals. Rather, the ministry supplied through gifted persons equips the saints themselves to minister. The ultimate goal is not the success of workers but the building up of the Body, which is realized practically in the local churches.

This perspective guards against the modern tendency to treat the church as a platform for ministry rather than the object of ministry. In much contemporary Christian thinking, the church hosts ministries, supports ministries, or partners with ministries. In the New Testament, the church is not a sponsor; it is the very expression of what ministry produces. Ministry does not exist to sustain itself; it exists to supply life to the church.

Paul's letters also show that ministry is accountable to the church. His authority, though apostolic, is not self-referential. He labors among the churches, writes to them, corrects them, and suffers for them. He does not position himself above the churches as an external authority, nor does he operate without regard for their condition. His ministry is relational, corporate, and deeply involved with the practical realities of church life.

Moreover, ministry in the New Testament presupposes mutual knowledge and fellowship. Paul knows the believers to whom he ministers, and they know him. He speaks of laboring among them, exhorting them, warning them, and caring for them as a nursing mother and an exhorting father. Such language is unintelligible apart from local church life. Ministry is not anonymous, distant, or mass-oriented; it is personal because it is corporate.

This also explains why the New Testament never envisions ministry as an end in itself. Ministry exists to bring believers into fellowship, function, and building. When ministry becomes detached from this goal, it easily turns inward, sustaining its own activity rather than serving God's purpose. The result is often impressive work without enduring building.

Importantly, recognizing ministry in the context of the local churches does not diminish its universality. The one ministry serves the one Body universally, but it does so through many local expressions. Universality is not achieved by transcending locality, but by being faithful within it. Paul's ministry touched many regions precisely because it produced churches rooted in their respective localities.

Thus, ministry in the New Testament is neither individualistic nor institutional. It is corporate, local, and organic. It flows from Christ through the Spirit into the believers, resulting in the practical building up of the church in each place. Any understanding of ministry that bypasses this context may retain spiritual language, but it no longer reflects apostolic reality.

To recover the New Testament meaning of ministry, therefore, requires recovering its proper setting. Ministry belongs to the church, lives in the church, and issues in the church. Outside this context, ministry may continue as activity, but it ceases to be what Paul meant when he spoke of the ministry.

## 7. One City, One Church — The Apostolic Framework

The New Testament presents a simple yet uncompromising framework for the church: one church in one city. This pattern is neither incidental nor cultural; it is apostolic in origin and theological in significance. It forms the practical setting in which ministry operates and the structural safeguard that preserves the oneness of the Body of Christ.

Throughout the New Testament, the church is always identified by locality, never by name, leader, doctrine, ethnicity, or practice. Scripture speaks consistently of the church in Jerusalem, the church in Antioch, the church of God which is in Corinth, and the churches of Galatia. Even when multiple gatherings existed within a city, they were never described as multiple churches. They were simply the church in that place.

This framework did not arise from convenience or limitation; it arose from revelation. The church is one because Christ is one. The Body is one because the Spirit is one. To divide the church within a single locality is therefore not merely organizational fragmentation; it is a practical denial of spiritual reality.

Paul makes this unmistakably clear when addressing the divisions in Corinth: "Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:13). His question assumes that division within the church is a contradiction of Christ Himself. The problem in Corinth was not theological disagreement alone, but the emergence of party spirit—believers identifying themselves by leaders, emphases, or preferences rather than by Christ. Paul's response is not to regulate multiple congregations but to call the saints back to the reality of oneness.

This has direct implications for ministry. Ministry in the New Testament presupposes a non-divided church. The one ministry serves the one Body expressed as one church in each city. When the church is fragmented into competing entities, ministry is inevitably fragmented as well. What Scripture presents as one ministry becomes many ministries, each aligned with a particular group, name, or vision.

The apostolic framework of one city, one church preserves ministry from this fragmentation. It removes the ground for rivalry, comparison, and competition. Ministry is no longer exercised on behalf of a group, but on behalf of the whole church in a locality. This aligns ministry with God's intention rather than human organization.

It is crucial to understand that one church in one city is not a denominational label, a movement name, or a sectarian claim. It does not mean our group is the church over against others. Such thinking merely reproduces division in another form. Rather, it is a descriptive reality: all believers in a given city, by virtue of the new birth, constitute the church in that place.

This is why the New Testament knows nothing of church membership as an added qualification. Believers are members of the church because they are members of Christ. The only practical question is not whether they belong, but how they meet. Ministry flows from this belonging; it does not create it.

The loss of this framework has profoundly affected modern Christianity. When multiple churches exist in one city, ministry is forced to adapt to division. It becomes group-centered rather than Body-centered. Leaders speak of our church, our ministry, and our vision, language that would have been unintelligible to the apostles. The result is sincere labor carried out within a fragmented ecclesial landscape.

Paul's ministry operated on entirely different assumptions. He did not minister to competing churches within a city; he ministered to the church. His letters address the saints collectively, even when correcting serious problems. He never appeals to believers to leave one church for another, nor does he validate separate assemblies as parallel expressions of the church in the same place.

This apostolic framework also safeguards the ministry from hierarchy. When the church is one in a city, leadership exists for care and oversight, not for control or distinction. Elders are not ranked officials presiding over competing ministries, but fellow believers raised up to shepherd the flock among them. Ministry remains a supply of life, not an exercise of authority.

To recover the New Testament meaning of ministry, therefore, requires recovering the framework in which it operates. The ministry cannot be properly understood apart from the church, and the church cannot be properly understood apart from the principle of one city, one church. This principle does not demand uniformity of practice, but it does require oneness of standing.

Such a vision may seem impractical or even impossible in a divided Christian world. Yet the measure of truth is not feasibility but faithfulness. The New Testament does not adjust its vision to human failure; it presents God's intention and calls believers to align with it.

The apostolic framework remains what it has always been: one Body, one ministry, one church in one city. Wherever believers begin to see this not as a slogan, but as a spiritual reality, ministry is rescued from fragmentation and restored to its proper place as the supply of Christ for the building up of His Body.

### 8. "Local Church" — Description, Not Denomination

The phrase "local church" must be handled with great care, because it is capable of two opposite meanings. Used rightly, it is a simple description of the church as the New Testament presents it: the believers in a locality meeting as the church in that place. Used wrongly, it becomes a denominational label, the very thing the New Testament rejects. Because the modern Christian world is saturated with divisions, the same words that once expressed oneness can now be hijacked to produce another sect.

In the New Testament, the church is local by nature. This does not mean there are two kinds of churches, some "local" and others not. It means that the one universal church, which is the Body of Christ, is expressed and lived out practically in definite places on the earth. The apostles did not identify the church by doctrine, leader, style, or heritage, but by locality: the church in Jerusalem, the church in Antioch, the church of God which is in Corinth, and so forth. The ground of the church was simply the ground of the city.

Thus, "local" is not a brand. It is not a distinctive. It is not a category that places one group over against another group. It is merely the scriptural way to describe the church's practical expression. The church is universal in life, essence, and fellowship, yet local in its gathering, testimony, and administration. This is why Scripture can simultaneously speak of "the

church" as one Body and of "the churches" as many lampstands in many cities. The plurality is not denominational; it is geographical.

Because of this, the words "the local church" should never be used in the sense of "our kind of church." The moment "local church" becomes a self-designation that separates believers into "us" and "them," it has already betrayed its meaning. The New Testament does not permit any "special church" identity within a locality. The church in a city includes all the believers in that city, regardless of background. To claim the title "local church" as if it belongs uniquely to a particular group is to create another division while speaking the language of oneness.

Here we must be absolutely clear. The recovery of the New Testament pattern is not a call to form a new movement called "the Local Church." It is a call to return to the scriptural reality that believers in one locality should meet as one church. The moment that recovery is institutionalized into a named entity, it becomes what it claims to oppose. The New Testament never asks believers to join a movement. It calls believers to stand on the ground of the oneness of the Body, expressed practically in the locality where they live.

This is also why the phrase "local church" must remain descriptive rather than exclusive. Properly used, it describes what is already true of every believer by the new birth: every child of God belongs to Christ, belongs to the Body, and therefore belongs to the church in the place where he lives. No believer needs a second qualification to be part of the church. The only remaining matter is the practical one of meeting with the saints on the ground of oneness, not on the ground of preference or division.

In a modern city filled with many "churches," this may sound strange. Yet the strangeness is not in the New Testament; it is in the modern condition. Scripture has not changed. Christ has not changed. The Body has not changed. What has changed is the outward landscape of Christianity, which has normalized division. Therefore, the recovery of the New Testament meaning of "local church" will always feel like a confrontation with what is common.

But this confrontation must be handled in the spirit of Christ, not in sectarian pride. The goal is never to label others or to claim superiority. The goal is to be faithful to God's revelation while maintaining humility toward all believers. Many dear saints love the Lord in every Christian tradition. The issue is not their salvation, sincerity, or devotion. The issue is whether the church is being expressed in the way the apostles revealed.

Therefore, "local church" must remain what it is in Scripture: a description of the church's practical expression in a locality, not the name of a denomination. When this distinction is preserved, the phrase becomes a safeguard for oneness. When it is lost, the phrase becomes a tool of division. This is why we must re-examine not only the word "ministry," but also the vocabulary surrounding the church itself. In a degraded situation, even scriptural words can be used in unscriptural ways unless their meaning is recovered and guarded.

## 9. The Rise of Ministries in Post-Apostolic Christianity

The emergence of multiple "ministries" as a defining feature of Christian life did not originate in the New Testament period. It arose gradually in the centuries following the apostles, as the church's organic structure gave way to institutional forms and as spiritual function was increasingly replaced by administrative necessity. To understand the present confusion surrounding ministry, one must first understand how this development occurred.

In the apostolic age, ministry existed within a clear spiritual framework: Christ as the unique Head, the Spirit as the inward supply, and the church as a living Body expressed locally. Ministry was not categorized, named, or subdivided. It was simply the service of Christ carried out through His members for the building up of the church. The language of Scripture reflects this simplicity. The apostles speak of "the ministry," not "ministries," and they always speak of it in relation to Christ and the church, not to programs or functions.

After the death of the apostles, however, several changes began to take place simultaneously. The loss of living apostolic oversight created a vacuum that was gradually filled by structural authority. Elders who had once functioned as fellow overseers within the Body began to assume elevated roles. Over time, these roles hardened into offices, and offices became titles. With this shift came a corresponding change in how service was understood.

As the church expanded numerically and geographically, and as persecution alternated with periods of political favor, the church increasingly adopted organizational patterns drawn from civil and philosophical sources. The simple gatherings of believers gave way to formal assemblies. Care of souls became professionalized. Teaching became specialized. What had once been shared functioning became delegated responsibility.

It is in this environment that the concept of distinct ministries began to emerge. Service was no longer viewed primarily as the corporate activity of the Body, but as the task of designated persons operating within defined roles. Ministry was increasingly associated with position rather than life. Certain functions were elevated, others marginalized, and the organic balance of the Body was gradually lost.

By the time Christianity became legally recognized and later officially endorsed by the Roman Empire, this shift was firmly entrenched. The church had become an institution, and institutions require administration. Administration requires specialization. Specialization inevitably produces categories. Thus, ministry began to fragment into identifiable forms of service, each with its own scope, authority, and identity.

This fragmentation did not occur because believers ceased to love Christ. It occurred because the church's self-understanding changed. As the church came to see itself as a religious organization within society, ministry was redefined accordingly. The language of stewardship and service was retained, but its content was altered. Ministry was no longer primarily the overflow of Christ as life within the Body, but the execution of religious functions within an institutional framework.

Over the centuries, this development accelerated. Monastic orders, clerical hierarchies, missionary societies, charitable institutions, and later denominational boards and parachurch organizations all contributed to an increasingly complex ministry landscape. Each development addressed real needs, yet each also moved further away from the New Testament pattern of ministry as a singular reality embedded in the local church.

By the modern era, the word "ministry" had undergone a complete semantic shift. What the New Testament treated as a unified spiritual stewardship had become a flexible label applied to almost any organized religious activity. Ministries could now be created, named, expanded, merged, or dissolved with little reference to the church as the Body of Christ. Ministry became something that could exist alongside the church, outside the church, or even independently of it.

This historical process explains why contemporary Christianity speaks so freely of ministries in the plural. What now seems normal would have been unintelligible to the apostles. Paul did not conceive of ministry as a collection of specialized enterprises. He understood ministry as one divine stewardship, entrusted by God, exercised through the Body, and directed toward the building up of the church.

It is important to note that the rise of ministries did not occur in a vacuum. It arose within a broader loss of the church's organic character. As the church became defined by structure rather than life, ministry followed the same trajectory. What was once living became functional. What was once relational became procedural. What was once corporate became segmented.

This historical development sets the stage for the present condition. The modern Christian world did not invent ministries arbitrarily; it inherited them. Yet inheritance does not equal legitimacy. To evaluate modern usage, one must return to the apostolic standard. That evaluation, however, belongs to the next section.

## 10. Why Modern Usage Is Contrary to the New Testament

The modern usage of the word ministry is not merely different from the New Testament usage; it is contrary to it. The difference is not one of emphasis, vocabulary, or cultural expression, but of definition, source, and goal. What the New Testament presents as a singular, divine stewardship has been transformed into a pluralized system of religious functions. This transformation represents not development, but deviation.

In the New Testament, ministry originates with God. Paul consistently speaks of ministry as something received, not chosen, created, or organized. He thanks God for putting him into the ministry, indicating that ministry is an entrustment arising from God's calling and operation, not from human initiative. Ministry is therefore not self-appointed, nor institutionally generated. It is given by God and governed by Him.

Modern Christianity reverses this order. Ministries are commonly conceived, launched, and sustained by human planning. They arise in response to perceived needs, demographic categories, or strategic goals. While such intentions may be sincere, they fundamentally

relocate the source of ministry from divine stewardship to human design. What Scripture treats as received from God, modern usage treats as produced by the church.

The New Testament also defines ministry by content, not by function. Ministry is the dispensing of Christ Himself as life, Spirit, and reality into the believers. Paul speaks of the ministry of the new covenant not as a set of activities, but as the Spirit giving life. Ministry is therefore measured not by outward success, participation, or visibility, but by inward supply and transformation.

Modern usage, by contrast, defines ministry primarily by function. A ministry is identified by what it does: teaching, outreach, counseling, music, youth work, administration, or social service. The focus shifts from what is ministered to what is performed. Christ as content recedes, while activity becomes central. Ministry becomes something that can be evaluated, compared, and replicated, concepts foreign to the New Testament.

Furthermore, New Testament ministry is inseparable from the church. Ministry exists for the Body, within the Body, and through the Body. Paul never speaks of ministry operating independently of the church, nor of ministries existing alongside the church as parallel entities. Ministry is always embedded in the life and fellowship of the local churches.

Modern Christianity, however, routinely detaches ministry from the church. Ministries may operate across churches, above churches, or entirely outside them. Some ministries are only loosely connected to any local church at all. This separation creates a structural contradiction: ministry without the Body, service without corporate context, activity without organic grounding.

The New Testament also presents ministry as singular in essence, even when diverse in expression. Paul speaks repeatedly of the ministry, emphasizing its unity. Though different functions exist, they all serve the same purpose: the building up of the Body of Christ. Diversity functions within unity; it does not fracture it.

Modern usage, on the other hand, normalizes plurality at the level of essence. Ministries are not merely different expressions of one ministry; they become distinct entities with separate identities, leadership structures, goals, and loyalties. This plurality fragments what Scripture presents as one. The result is not complementary functioning, but parallel operations.

Another critical difference lies in orientation. New Testament ministry is inwardly oriented toward life and building. Its horizon is the growth of Christ in the believers and the increase of the Body. Modern ministry is often outwardly oriented toward reach, impact, and expansion. While outreach itself is not wrong, when outward goals dominate, ministry is reshaped according to results rather than life.

Finally, the New Testament locates ministry in the functioning of all the saints. Ministry is not concentrated in a professional class, but distributed throughout the Body. Leadership exists to perfect the saints unto the work of ministry, not to replace them. Ministry is

therefore corporate, mutual, and shared.

Modern usage, by contrast, frequently narrows ministry to specialists. Ordinary believers become recipients or volunteers, not functioning members. Ministry becomes something done by some for others, rather than something expressed by the Body as a whole. This contradicts Paul's vision of a living organism in which every part operates.

For these reasons, modern usage of the word ministry cannot be reconciled with the New Testament simply by redefining terms or adding biblical language. The contradiction lies at the level of source, content, context, unity, and goal. What Scripture presents as life has become activity. What Scripture presents as stewardship has become structure. What Scripture presents as one has become many.

This recognition prepares the way for recovery. But before recovery can be described, the contradiction must be seen clearly. Only when modern usage is measured honestly against the apostolic revelation can believers begin to return to the simplicity and purity of New Testament ministry.

## 11. Ministry and the Building Up of the Body

In the New Testament, ministry is inseparably joined to one governing purpose: the building up of the Body of Christ. This is not one goal among many; it is the goal that defines ministry itself. Any service, labor, or function that does not result in the building up of the Body—no matter how sincere, energetic, or beneficial it may appear—falls outside the apostolic meaning of ministry.

Paul states this purpose explicitly and repeatedly. He does not measure ministry by reach, influence, or effectiveness, but by whether Christ is being built into the believers and whether the believers are being built together into one Body. For Paul, ministry exists because God is building something. Ministry serves building, not activity.

This is why Paul consistently connects ministry with growth, transformation, and corporate increase. The Body is not built by accumulation, but by organic growth in life. Christ must increase in the believers, and the believers must be joined together in Him. Ministry, therefore, is not primarily outward labor; it is inward supply resulting in corporate formation.

In this light, teaching is not ministry unless it builds. Shepherding is not ministry unless it builds. Evangelizing is not ministry unless it builds. The New Testament never treats these activities as ends in themselves. They are meaningful only insofar as they contribute to the building up of the church as the Body of Christ.

This sharply contrasts with modern Christian practice, where many activities are labeled ministry without reference to building. Believers may be informed, inspired, entertained, or mobilized, yet remain unbuilt. They may be active, yet isolated. They may be involved, yet not joined. According to the New Testament, this is a fundamental failure of ministry.

The separate ministries of Christianity, however sincere they may be, can never build up the Body of Christ. By their very nature, they operate along lines of division—division by emphasis, function, leadership, or audience. Rather than producing corporate building, they reinforce fragmentation. Each ministry builds according to its own scope and identity, not according to the oneness of the Body. The result is not a coordinated structure, but a heap of disconnected labor that ultimately collapses under its own weight.

Paul's word in Ephesians makes this unmistakably clear. He presents gifted persons not as performers of ministry, but as servants whose function is to bring the saints into ministry, so that the Body may be built up. The direction is always corporate. Ministry flows toward the Body, not away from it.

This building is not organizational. It is not the expansion of an institution or the strengthening of a system. It is the building of living persons together in Christ. Paul uses architectural language—building, foundation, structure—yet always with organic content. The materials are living stones; the cement is love; the growth is life.

Because ministry is for building, it must be relational and mutual. The Body cannot be built by spectators. Every member must function according to the measure of life received. Ministry, therefore, aims not at producing followers, but at producing functioning members. The success of ministry is not how many are gathered, but how many are built.

This also explains why Paul is so intolerant of anything that damages the Body. Division, pride, individualism, and competition are not minor problems; they strike at the very goal of ministry. If ministry builds up individuals while leaving the Body divided, it contradicts its own purpose.

At this point, the New Testament introduces a sobering prophetic category: Mystery Babylon. Scripture does not use this term to describe paganism alone, but a religious system marked by mixture—truth blended with worldliness, Christ blended with human organization, and divine language employed to sustain a structure contrary to God's revealed order. One of Babylon's defining characteristics is fragmentation: a multitude of religious works and ministries existing side by side, each claiming legitimacy, yet none producing the corporate building God desires.

It is therefore significant that the Word issues an explicit command: "Come out of her, My people, that you do not partake of her sins and that you do not receive of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4). This call is not a denunciation of individual believers—God calls them "My people"—but a summons to separation from a system that institutionalizes division. To remain within such a system is not neutral; it is participatory. Division cannot build the Body of Christ, and ministry that perpetuates division inevitably contributes to Babylon's structure.

In the New Testament, the building up of the Body is both the means and the result of ministry. As the Body is built, ministry increases. As ministry increases, the Body is built. There is no separation between the two. Ministry that does not result in building eventually

degenerates into activity. Building that is not supplied by ministry collapses into form.

Thus, ministry and building are not parallel themes; they are one reality viewed from two sides. Ministry is Christ being supplied; building is Christ being formed corporately. Where this vision governs, ministry remains singular, corporate, and life-centered. Where it is lost, ministry fragments, multiplies, and becomes detached from the church's essential purpose.

This brings us to a sober conclusion: ministry exists for the Body, not the Body for ministry. The moment ministry becomes an end in itself, the church is damaged. The New Testament never allows ministry to define the church; it allows the church to define ministry. Only when this order is preserved can ministry remain pure, humble, and effective. Christ is ministered. The saints are built. The Body grows. God's eternal purpose moves forward.

## 12. Safeguards Against Sectarian Misuse

Every genuine recovery of truth carries with it a corresponding danger: the danger that the truth itself will be misused. History shows that what God reveals for oneness can be seized by the flesh and turned into another ground of division. For this reason, any clear presentation of New Testament ministry and church life must include explicit safeguards against sectarian misuse.

The New Testament never allows truth to be wielded as a weapon. Truth is given for building, not for separation; for illumination, not for accusation. Paul's concern was never merely that believers hold correct doctrine, but that they walk according to Christ in humility and love. Without this spirit, even the clearest revelation becomes destructive.

One of the most common misuses arises when believers take the language of oneness and turn it into a badge of distinction. Phrases such as "the local church," "the ground of oneness," or "coming out of Babylon" can be subtly transformed from descriptions of spiritual reality into markers of group identity. The moment this happens, the truth has already been betrayed. What was given to remove division becomes the means of creating another.

The New Testament never permits believers to define themselves as the church over against other believers. Such a claim contradicts the very essence of the Body of Christ. The church in a locality includes all the believers in that place, not only those who see or practice the truth in a particular way. To claim exclusive status is to repeat the Corinthian error under a different name.

This danger is especially acute when speaking of Mystery Babylon. Scripture's call to come out of her is a call to separation from religious mixture, not a call to self-righteous withdrawal. Babylon is not everyone else. Babylon is any system, including one formed in reaction to Christianity, that substitutes organization for life, structure for fellowship, or correctness for Christ.

Therefore, to come out of Babylon does not mean to stand above other believers, judge their condition, or sever fellowship indiscriminately. It means to refuse participation in systems

that institutionalize division and replace the organic Body with human arrangements. The posture is one of obedience, not superiority.

Another safeguard lies in recognizing that truth is progressively seen, not universally apprehended at once. Paul did not demand instant conformity to the highest revelation. He labored patiently, bearing weakness, correcting gently, and trusting the Lord's work in time. Any attempt to enforce truth outwardly produces conformity without life, the very condition Babylon represents.

The New Testament also guards against sectarian misuse by emphasizing function over position. Truth is validated not by claims, labels, or alignments, but by whether Christ is being ministered and whether the Body is being built. Where believers grow in Christ, love one another, and are joined together in life, truth is being lived, even if understanding is incomplete.

Moreover, the apostolic pattern insists on open fellowship. The church is not a closed circle of the enlightened, but a household where Christ is enjoyed and supplied. Fellowship is broken only by denial of Christ Himself, not by differences in understanding, practice, or growth. To narrow fellowship on any other ground is to sectarianize truth.

Perhaps the greatest safeguard of all is the recognition that Christ alone is the Head of the church. The moment a group, teaching, or recovery begins to function as a controlling center, sectarianism has already begun. The Headship of Christ is not preserved by asserting it verbally, but by refusing to replace His living direction with human authority or fixed systems.

Finally, the New Testament consistently calls believers to humility. Paul, who saw the highest revelations, referred to himself as the least of the apostles and the chief of sinners. This inward posture is not incidental; it is essential. Without humility, truth becomes oppressive. With humility, truth remains liberating.

Therefore, any genuine return to apostolic ministry and church life must be accompanied by these safeguards: humility rather than pride, fellowship rather than exclusion, life rather than form, building rather than labeling, and Christ rather than correctness. Only under these conditions can the truth recover what it was meant to recover, not a movement, not a group, but the living Body of Christ expressed in oneness.

## 13. Conclusion — Returning to Apostolic Simplicity

The New Testament vision of ministry is marked by a profound simplicity. It is simple not because it is shallow, but because it is singular. One Christ. One Body. One ministry. One expression of the church in each locality. Everything else in the New Testament flows from this governing reality.

The confusion surrounding ministry today did not arise because the Scriptures are unclear. It arose because the church gradually departed from the organic simplicity revealed by the apostles. What was once living became formal. What was once corporate became

segmented. What was once Christ-centered became activity-driven. The result is the fragmented landscape now called Christianity, filled with ministries yet lacking building.

The call of this writing has not been to condemn, to mock, or to elevate one group over another. It has been to return. To return to Christ as life. To return to the Spirit as the supply. To return to the Body as the sphere of ministry. To return to the church as the practical expression of God's eternal purpose on the earth.

This return does not begin outwardly. It begins inwardly, in the regenerated human spirit where Christ dwells. Ministry is recovered not by forming new works, adopting new labels, or correcting others, but by believers living Christ together. When Christ is lived, He is ministered. When He is ministered, the Body is built. When the Body is built, God's purpose advances.

The New Testament never calls believers to fix Christianity. It calls them to follow Christ. It never commands reform of Babylon; it commands separation from mixture. It never invites believers to create alternatives; it reveals a divine reality and calls them to walk in it. The simplicity of the apostolic way is not achieved by effort, but by obedience.

To return to apostolic simplicity is therefore not to withdraw from believers, but to stand on the ground of oneness. It is not to isolate oneself from the Body, but to refuse division as a principle. It is not to boast in revelation, but to walk humbly before God and men. It is not to abandon service, but to allow service to flow from life.

Such a return will never be popular. Simplicity does not impress in a world that values size, influence, and success. Yet God has never advanced His purpose by popularity. He advances it by life. Wherever even a few believers learn to live Christ, love one another, and meet as the church on the ground of oneness, the New Testament reality is present.

This is the church the apostles knew. This is the ministry Paul served. This is the Body Christ is building today.

The call remains the same: not to do more, but to be brought back — back to Christ, back to life, back to the Body, back to the church as God ordained it.

This is not a new way. It is the original one.